

*To Each Their Home*

An Honors Thesis (AFA 489)

by

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Thesis Advisor  
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David T. Hannon". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

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## Abstract

For my Senior Thesis, I have created a series of five paintings, each 4' x 6' in size to be displayed in Ball State's Atrium Gallery from April 13<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup>. The work is both acrylic and oil paint on canvas. Throughout the semester, I also made small paintings on 8" x 12" paper. Seven of these smaller works were displayed with the final series in the Atrium Gallery exhibition. This body of work is about my frustrations with moral relativism and the fallacies I see within it. The process of constructing a moral code and figuring out what is right and what is wrong has become a personal process in our culture. I think there is a lot of instability that comes out of this. Individuals are influenced and pressured by their peers and mentors to form their moral code in agreement with them, yet are abandoned by these same people when phrases like, "what is right for me might not be right for you", or "who am I to say what is right or wrong for another" are constantly thrown around.

Stylistically, I continue to push my use of materials in both acrylic and oil paint. I am interested in the wide range of painterly effects of these two mediums, and in finding ways to combine multiple styles onto the same surface. I paint representational objects and surfaces to reference the natural world, and break up the objects and landscape references with areas of flat color and abstract painting.

I am using natural imagery as a metaphor for the created world we live in, versus the "worlds" we create for ourselves. I incorporate themes of individual pursuits of an absolute truth compared to individual creations of personal truths. Within these works, there are fragments of Creation, both seamlessly existing in a background component, and twisted and manipulated into a form that an individual tries to reside in. These paintings contain man-made, individually-built structures and dwellings. The structures appear unstable, and their placement and relation to the surrounding landscape is unclear. These "homes" represent an individual's construction of a moral code, and the fragile and isolating existence that moral relativism causes for humans.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of the professors of Ball State's School of Art, especially Hannah Barnes, Scott Anderson, and my thesis advisor, David Hannon. My art education over the past four years has sharpened my artistic and critical thinking skills, and has opened doors for future endeavors and goals beyond what I had ever imagined for myself. I would also like to thank all of my friends and family who continue to support me in my fine arts career.

Laura Lemna

Professor David Hannon

AFA 498

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## To Each Their Home – B.F.A. Thesis in Painting

### I. Significance

This series of work tells the autobiographical account of a young person's experiences in her generation, but this tale is relevant beyond the autobiographical elements. What is right or wrong, what is good or bad, how a person decides that and what they decide to do with it are timeless questions. No one escapes these decisions. I am fascinated by the duality of this journey. My pursuit for Truth and morality is an undertaking that I experience individually. Yet it is an undertaking that virtually every person has embarked on, or will embark on, in some way or another. I do not understand what shapes this experience for a person; I know only the conversations, thoughts, and witnessed moments that make up mine. Through making this work, I am reflecting on my generation's mindset and my own conclusions and values formed while being a part of this generation.

For some people, the process of forming a moral code is simple. They know where they believe answers to be and they refer to this source without doubt. Or, they learn a moral code, understand it to be true, and are loyal to it. For some people, this process is difficult. They turn into themselves and try to navigate their feelings, they change their mind with every new experience, or they allow themselves to be influenced by the people around them. It is increasingly difficult in



our current culture of moral relativism, where this process is expected to be an individual's responsibility.

People in this generation have incredibly strong opinions on social and moral issues. On one hand, it is seen as unacceptable and ignorant to not have formulated opinions. Education is valued, ideas are showered upon us through social media, and information is widely available and frequently shared. On the other hand, it is often seen as unacceptable or inappropriate to hold unwavering positions, or state our opinions in a way that proclaims them to be the only correct ones. Alluding to an Absolute Truth upsets many young people of this generation. It is this conflicting standard that is frustrating. If you believe something to be true, how could you argue that it is only true to you?

I have personally felt abandoned and injured from the philosophy of moral relativism, and I have witnessed countless others struggle because of it, whether or not they have an understanding of the philosophy or recognize the fact that it has permeated our culture. If a moral standard does not exist, how can anyone be held accountable for anything? If an individual's idea of right and wrong is a personal ideology, how can they be punished, rewarded, chastised, or praised? In a relativist world, almost all conversations of substance will be cut short to avoid controversy, or will remain vague and indefinite. It is an unstable approach. It abandons people in their need to understand the world and themselves.

I can express with certainty only my understanding of morality. Yet I also know with certainty that every human is faced with the process of understanding a moral code or creating one by which they conduct their life. The significance and

relevance of this series of work derives not only from its exploration of contemporary painting practices, but from the content and context. Morality, and humanity's relationship to the universe, created earth, and each other are ageless themes for philosophers, artists, and any other person to contemplate. This series is both universally relatable and time-specific of this generation. These paintings are a reflection of this current culture's relativistic outlook, and an individual artist's experiences, frustrations, and opinions of this worldview.

## II. Influences

The context and significance of this work is influenced by the philosophical research I have done over the past two years, driven by a search for spirituality and a deeper understanding of the Catholic Church. As a young adult trying to form opinions on social and moral issues, the resource that gave me the most peace was the Church and its social teachings. I was reluctant at first to spend time learning about the faith that I had grown up in and luke-warmly practiced for my entire life, but this process has given me the answers, support and worldview that I could never find through my surroundings, my peers, or even my experiences.

This body of work focuses specifically on my search for truth in our culture, and my newfound understanding of our culture's treatment of truth. The currently flourishing philosophy is a philosophy of moral relativism. Under this system, everyone is responsible for developing his or her own idea of truth. No one's truth is better than anyone else's truth, and everything is valid. The problem is that this system collapses on itself immediately. If everything is true, then nothing is true.

Two of the most influential sources for the context of this work are *Veritatis Splendor*, an encyclical by Pope John Paul II, and *Absolute Relativism: The New Dictatorship and What to Do about It* by Chris Stefanick.

Stylistically, there are many contemporary painters that have influenced the way that I paint and how I choose imagery and visual languages. For this particular series of work, I am looking at artists Karin Mamma Andersson, David Salle, R.B. Kitaj, Roberto Juarez, and Amy Sillman.

Karin Mamma Andersson:



I find Andersson's treatment of landscapes especially interesting. To me, they seem sad, or full of a heavy story. Many of her compositions are inspired by theater and film sets, and she often creates unclear pictorial space and non-descript interior spaces. I love her combinations of indoor and outdoor spaces, as well as her color choices and the juxtaposition of washes and thick paint.

David Salle:



David Salle is known for divided up the painter's plane and placing seemingly unrelated imagery directly next to each other and on top of one another. I love the ambiguous connections and conversations that are created through his combination of objects, figures, and landscapes, and the fragmented narratives that appear.

Salle's work reminds me that representational painting can be used for the abstraction of ideas.

R.B. Kitaj:

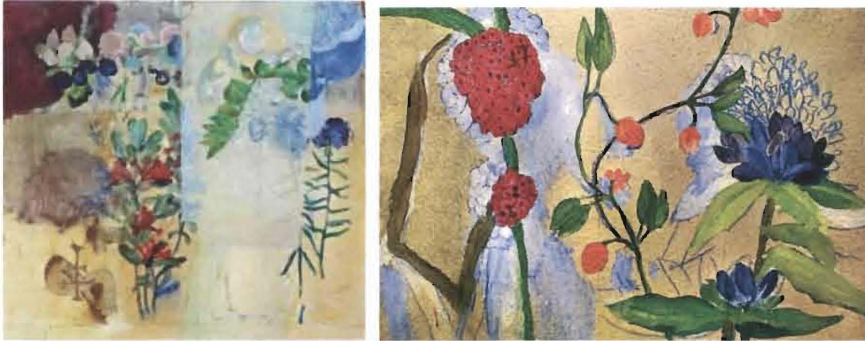


R.B. Kitaj creates a collage aesthetic by overlapping planes and layering. His works that I am most drawn to are the paintings that have disorienting landscapes and 3D constructions that are made from recognizable forms but look impossible to



exist in that manner and in that combination. I also like his use of flat color and modeled forms within the same space.

Roberto Juarez:



I am influenced by Juarez's use of natural imagery. I love how some of the plants that he paints take on an almost figurative quality and serve as characters in his work, while sometimes the plants serve as a device for formal decisions of line and shape. I also admire the earth tones and rich colors in his paintings, and the combination of transparent and opaque color. There is an interesting back and forth of flat color and three-dimensionality to his works, and I enjoy the geometric patterning that does not rely on hard edges.

Amy Sillman:



I love the drawing-based lines, texture, and physicality of paint in Amy Silman's paintings. I am continually in awe of her work and the honesty and ease from which her paintings seem to arrive. The multitude of paintings she develops and well as the fluid transitions between abstraction and figurative painting make her work and her style appear completely natural and completely her own. When I look at her paintings, I feel as though I am looking at an extension of her mind and her hand, as if making paintings is what she has to do and what she is supposed to do. I feel like this is the ultimate compliment, and it is what I strive for in my relationship with painting.

### III. Process/ Technique

The conception of this series arrived in the combination of an aesthetic style I was interested in exploring, and a thought I was interested in depicting. The conceptual component of these paintings began in research in philosophy and moral ethics, and continues to be sharpened through further reading and research. There is an autobiographical angle as well, coming from my understanding of this research and manifested through my responses. I respond to this research both in the way I live and make decisions, and in the ways I visually represent it in paint.

I want my paintings to have references to the natural world, and my favorite source to work with is the actual natural world. If I can obtain natural objects and paint from life, I prefer to do so. I bring rocks into the studio, and borrow nests from the campus library's educational resources collection. To paint skies, I look out the windows in my studio and paint what the sky is doing right then. To supplement

these observational processes, I also look at magazines, books, and photos for ideas and imagery. The abstraction of these elements, as well as the purely abstract portions in these paintings comes from sketches, spontaneous painting, and quickly responding to the painting at each level of completeness.

Before painting on the large canvases, I make a lot of sketches. In the case of this series, I also made 10 small studies with acrylic and oil on 8"x10" paper. The preliminary sketches and paintings are a mixture of compositional studies and small elements that might end up in the larger compositions. I test out color palates, situations with size and scale, and texture techniques.

After building the stretcher frame, stretching the canvas, and preparing the surface with gesso, the first thing that I do is mix an acrylic wash in a neutral color and cover the entire painting. The paintings in this series are the first ones that I have ever started with a colored wash, and I decided to do this in order to prevent myself from relying on the white of the canvas as the "base" layer. This beginning step has helped me be more intentional in my use of white as a design element, and adds a different color challenge to each of the five paintings. I then use acrylic paint to draw in rough compositional placement decisions and block in areas of color or texture. My color-mixing abilities are stronger with oil paint, and I switch from acrylics to oils fairly early in the stages of each painting. To make a surface that is stable and archival, acrylic paint cannot go on top of oil paint, but oil paint is able to go on top of acrylic.

I build up paintings in layers that respond to the previous layers by outlining elements, glazing over them, or completely covering them up. I am both adding and

editing at each stage of the painting. There is no steady rule for how the final composition emerges. Sometimes I place representational objects and surfaces on top of abstract painting, and sometimes I do the opposite. I use lines and geometric shapes to help me cut across different surfaces and create shifting planes to further complicate and confuse the landscape and the created space. I do not use rulers or straightedges, and I do not worry about creating hard lines. I prepare the paintings for display by cleaning up the edges of canvas with white gesso. The finished paintings are not framed.

#### IV. Description of Work

I have selected two paintings from this series of five to discuss further.



##### IV.a. *Neighbors*

In the world of *Neighbors*, the sky is textured magenta, sprinkled with tones of deep purple. Two forms drape across the sky, simultaneously implying both a



heavy, floating cloud, and a void that cuts back to the surface of the grassy foreground. Forms come in pairs in this painting. Two areas of pink and white pigment also float into the densely colored air. A sky blue mountain range creates the first layer of this landscape with humorously thick brushstrokes of snow capping the tops. Fields of gold and green glide back and forth the middle of the composition, leaving space for painted lines and shapes, and opening themselves up to be twisted into the first habitat-builder's plan. With the addition of a creamy yellow base and a slight cast shadow over the fields, the first rounded egg-shape home appears. It rests its heavy load on a tree stump, outlined in red and stuck onto the patchy, brushy, grassy earth. Two frail tree limbs barely secure the form into place. Another tree stump floats nearby. The second habitat has borrowed many of its colors and construction techniques from its admired, older, and wiser home. A white bowl form serves as the gateway into this secure pod, but the walls of this second habitat do not gain stability from the earth. The fields do not open up walls for it, and so its walls become a patchwork of green and white shapes. A white line trails off the bottom edge of the canvas, reminding us of the edge of a cliff or a hiker's path. Both the origin and the future of this home are ambiguous and unstable.

I am interested in how individuals construct their ethical and moral views, and from where they find their answers. We are highly impressionable. We are influenced by our peers and friends, and also by the people who raise us. I believe that many of us look to older people in our lives for trusted opinions on moral and social issues. In all five of the paintings in this body of work, I make references to

the natural world and depict a landscape that has been fragmented in order to include a “home” or structure for a person or small group of people to inhabit. In *Neighbors*, I wanted two of these structures to exist together in their environment to comment on the possible relationship and influence that can form between the moral codes of two individuals. This piece speaks of the authority that one person can have over another person’s sense of morality and their worldview. In this composition, I wanted to create two “habitats” that have structural similarities and similar relationships to the world they exist in.

#### IV.b. *Single-Person Dwelling*

In this painting, the specific references to the natural world that I chose to utilize invoke feelings of burrowing inside, safety, and isolation. The habitat in *Single-Person Dwelling* rests in a bird’s nest and contains a layer of hornet nests that either hovers in the air or is stuck to the constructed home. The landscape, or space where this habitat exists, is simpler than the landscapes in the other four paintings within this series. The space is less visually complex and crowded, but equally (if not more) confusing. It is difficult to tell what sort of space this is. There is a sky with representation elements, but it appears to be sliced up and spread around a thin brown painted surface. There is a ground level that references a sort of wheat field, but it looks like it has been ripped from its context and collaged into this fragmented setting. The bottom portion of the painting is a zone of thickly textured white and blue paint. There is movement that calls upon billowing clouds or tumultuous ocean waves, but it is not clearly natural in its construction. The only

thing it is for certain is thick paint, yet it holds as much visual weight as the representational light purple segments of sky. The habitat sits on the left side of the painting, gently resting on an area of paint with a warm golden glow. Disturbing this peaceful assemblage, a blood-red tunnel cuts underneath the golden resting spot of the dwelling. It's purpose and its intention is unknown, but there is a sense of danger radiating from its presence. It agitates the landscape's bottom zone. Has it been inserted in order to hold up the dwelling? Or has the home been built on an unstable section of earth? Could it collapse at any moment? Does anything living buzz around this habitat with anxiety and unrest? Is this a proper place to live? There are no resolutions to these questions found in the visual evidence of this painting.

In this series where habitats stand for individual ideologies and moral understandings of human existence, choosing to live in a "single-person dwelling" represents more than not wanting a roommate or not currently having a significant other. When building a moral code and guidelines for how to live your life is an individual's responsibility, isolation can be a product. Being reflective and introspective are qualities and skills that need to be strongly developed, but there is danger in burrowing too far into your own thoughts. We exist in this world together, and were created to be in community.

#### V. Artist Statement as presented in the exhibition

This body of work focuses specifically on my search for truth in our culture and my newfound understanding of our culture's treatment of truth. The currently

flourishing philosophy tells me that no one's truth is better than anyone else's truth, and everything is valid. The problem is that this system collapses on itself immediately. If everything is true, then nothing is true. This philosophy abandons people in their need to understand the world and themselves.

I am using representational imagery and natural forms and surfaces as a metaphor for the created world we live in, versus the worlds we create for ourselves. These paintings contain "man-made", individually-built structures and dwellings. The structures appear unstable, and their placement and relation to the surrounding landscape is unclear. These "homes" represent an individual's construction of a moral code, and the fragile and isolating existence that the philosophy of moral relativism causes for humans. Fragments of Creation exist both seamlessly in the background, and twist and morph into structures that an individual could try to reside in.

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The process of constructing a moral code and figuring out what is right and what is wrong has become a personal process. This work tells an autobiographical account, but how a person decides what is true and what they decide to do with that are timeless and universally relevant questions. I am fascinated by the duality of this journey that is both personal and universal. My pursuit for Truth and morality is an undertaking that I experience individually. Yet it is an undertaking that virtually every person has embarked on, or will embark on, in some way or another. I do not understand what shapes this experience for a person; I know only the conversations, thoughts, and witnessed moments that make up mine. Through making this work, I am reflecting on my generation's mindset and my own conclusions and values formed while being a part of my generation.

#### VI. List of titles, dimensions and media of work exhibited

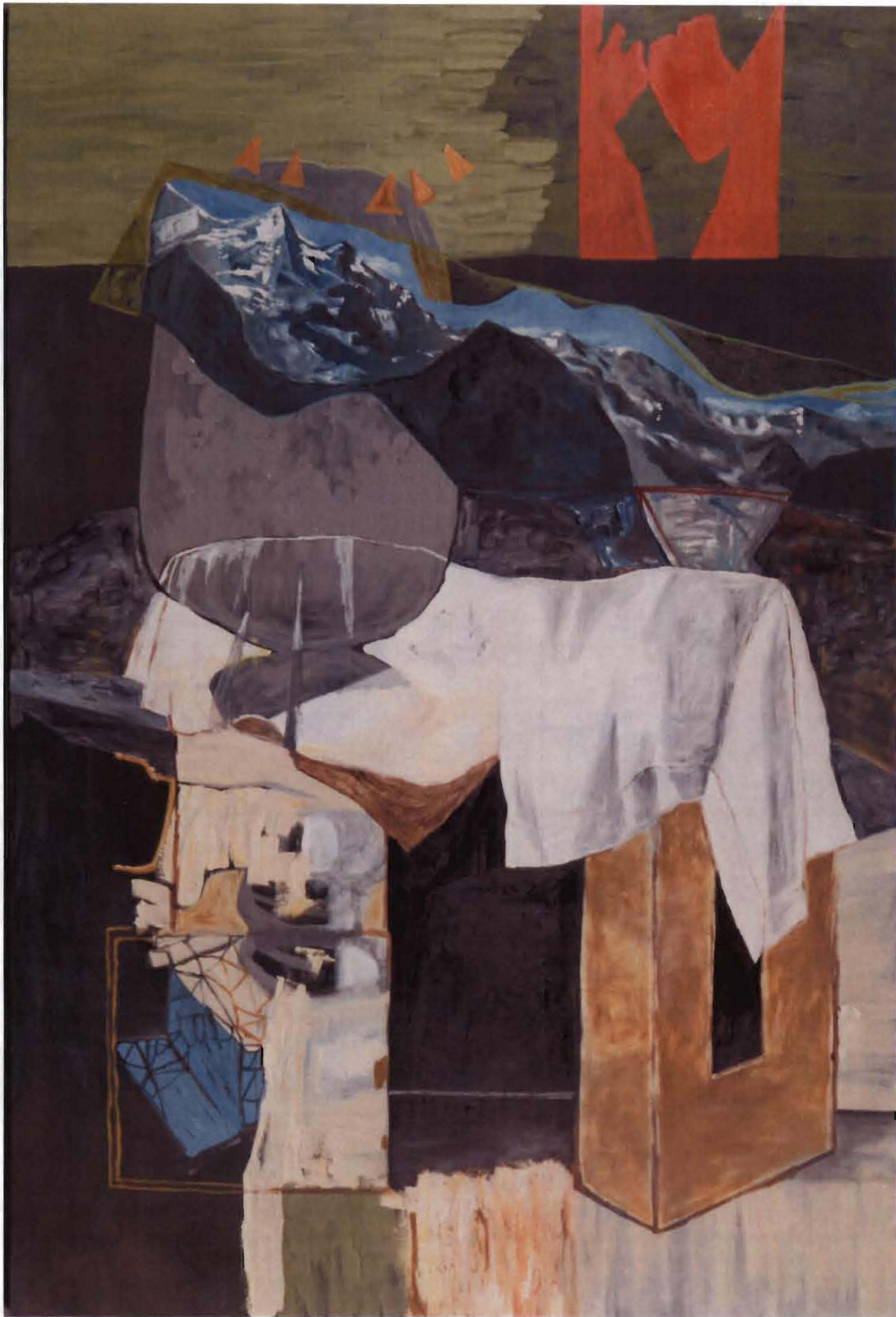
Lake View	4'x6'	acrylic and oil on canvas
The Stubborn Club	4'x6'	acrylic and oil on canvas
House with Curtains	4'x6'	acrylic and oil on canvas
Single-Person Dwelling	4'x6'	acrylic and oil on canvas
Neighbors	4'x6'	acrylic and oil on canvas

#### VII. Photographed Work



Lake View  
4'x6'  
acrylic and oil on canvas





The Stubborn Club  
4'x6'  
acrylic and oil on canvas

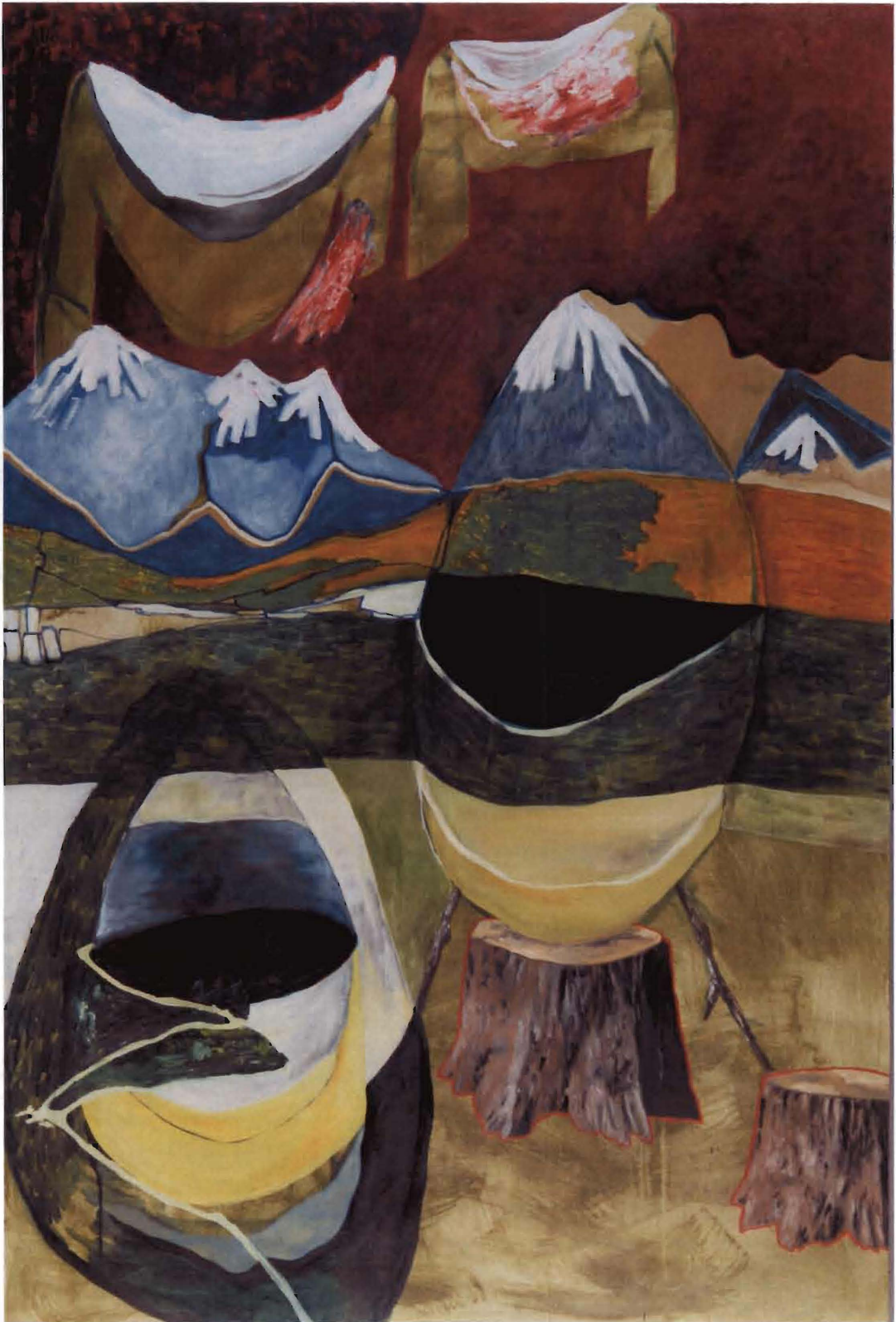


House with Curtains  
4'x6'  
acrylic and oil on canvas





Single-Person Dwelling  
4'x6'  
acrylic and oil on canvas



Neighbors

4'x6'

acrylic and oil on canvas

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